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Philosophy's dark heir: On Nick Land's abstract horror fiction

ABSTRACT
Nick Land is a British philosopher who developed a compelling transcendental materialist critique of anthropocentric philosophies throughout the 1990s before leaving academia at the turn of the century and moving to Shanghai. While he is now best known for his controversial pro-capitalist political writings, he has also recently developed a theory of what he calls 'abstract horror fiction', as well as applied it in practice by writing two abstract horror novellas. Although one might think that Land's horror fiction, like his recent far-right politics, marks a new and independent body of work from his earlier academic writings as a philosopher, this article argues that Land turns to writing horror fiction, because he sees the genre as a better compositional form than traditional philosophy to continue his critique of anthropomorphism insofar as it is able to stage a confrontation with that which lies beyond all parochial human comprehension. I begin by outlining Land's earlier critique of anthropocentric philosophies with recourse to the brute fact of humanity's inexorable extinction as a way to undermine their attempts to project human values and concepts onto an inhuman cosmos for all time. I then examine Land's theory of abstract horror to see how he envisions horror fiction as the best aesthetic means for transcendentally channeling the traumatic limits of human experience. I conclude with an analysis of Land's two horror novellas, Phyl-Undhu *and* Chasm, *to draw out the ways in which his earlier critical philosophy continues to inform their literary motifs. What ultimately emerges from this analysis of Land's fiction is a conception of horror as the dark heir to critical philosophy.*

KEYWORDS
Nick Land
horror
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Nick Land is an English philosopher who developed a compelling transcendental materialist critique of anthropocentric philosophies throughout the 1990s before leaving academia at the turn of the century and moving to Shanghai. While he is now best known for his controversial pro-capitalist political writings, he has also recently developed a theory of what he calls 'abstract horror fiction', as well as applied it in practice by writing two abstract horror novellas. Although one might think that Land's horror fiction, like his recent politics, marks a new and independent body of work from his earlier academic writings as a philosopher, this article argues that Land turns to writing horror fiction because he sees the genre as a better compositional form than traditional philosophy to continue his critique of anthropomorphism insofar as it is able to stage a confrontation with that which lies beyond all parochial human comprehension.

In this respect, Land is one of a number of contemporary philosophers like Graham Harman and Eugene Thacker, who are associated with 'the speculative turn' in contemporary continental philosophy, a turn which increasingly engages with horror fiction as a way to critique philosophy's anthropocentric biases.[1] In his 2012 book *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy*, for instance, Harman follows Land in championing H.P. Lovecraft's significance for speculative metaphysics insofar as his compositional style never describes his monsters directly, but only ever depicts them as they recede from the vantage point of human intelligibility: 'no other writer gives us monsters and cities so difficult to describe that he can only hint at their anomalies' (Harman 2012: 16). As this essay shows, however, whereas Land heralds horror fiction as an organon for philosophical critique, Harman holds that Lovecraft's use of horror is incidental to his style, which could be employed in many other genres: 'Lovecraft as an author of horror writes about horrific content (monstrous creatures more powerful than humans and with no regard for our welfare), while Lovecraft the author of gaps is one who could have flourished in many other genres' (2012: 11). This makes Land closer to Thacker whose three-volume *Horror of Philosophy* series argues that horror writers enable us to think the limits of thought as they depict a 'world-in-itself' which is radically indifferent to our values and concerns: 'it is in the genres of supernatural horror and science fiction that we most frequently find attempts to think about, and to confront the difficult thought of, the world-without-us' (Thacker 2011: 10). Notwithstanding the similarities between Thacker and Land's understanding of horror fiction, there is a crucial difference. For Thacker, horror does not so much invoke a fear of death as it does a dread at an excess of what he calls 'Life-in-itself' which seems to outlast the particular experiences of any one living being. Be it vampires and the living dead or biological plagues and viruses, for Thacker, horror captures those instances of life which paradoxically turn against life itself: 'each of these figures are literally living contradictions. The zombie is the animated corpse, the vampire is the decay of immortality. […] *Horror expresses the logic of incommensurability between Life and the living*' (2011: 92). As we shall see, while Thacker contends that horror fiction draws upon an overflowing of life in contradiction to our lived experience, Land is adamant that horror explores the utter annihilation of humanity and indeed all life itself.

Beyond these particular differences, there are two more general reasons why Land stands out as a particularly important figure in thinking about the intersection between horror and philosophy. Firstly, Land is not so much a thinker of the speculative turn as he is its chief forerunner, having taught two of

1. *Collapse*, the major journal associated with the speculative turn, has dedicated an entire volume to the concept horror (Mackay and Veal: 2008). For an excellent overview of the resonances between the speculative turn and horror fiction, see Botting (2012).

the four founding members of the 'speculative realist' movement (Ray Brassier and Iain Hamilton Grant) at Warwick University in the nineties, as well as influenced a number of other associated figures (such as Robin Mackay and Reza Negarestani). It is no wonder that the blurb for Harman's *Weird Realism* identifies Land as the first philosopher in recent times to seriously engage with Lovecraft: 'initially championed by shadowy guru Nick Land at Warwick during the 1990s, he was later discovered to be an object of private fascination for all four original members of the twenty-first century Speculative Realist movement' (2012). The second reason Land is of particular interest is that, although the second volume of Thacker's *Horror of Philosophy* trilogy reads 'works of philosophy as if they were works of horror' and the third volume reads works of 'horror for these sort of – dare we say – philosophical questions they raise' in a way which begins to blur the lines between horror and philosophy, only Land has gone so far as to actually turn from producing philosophy to writing horror fiction (2015: 19, 2015a: 16). This perhaps puts Land closer to the likes of Thomas Ligotti who has also written about the horror genre's philosophical importance whilst for the most part sticking to actually writing horror stories (Ligotti 2010). It is precisely Land's rigorous background in philosophy, however, which permits him to provide a uniquely philosophically informed approach to the composition of horror fiction. So, Land's significance to those interested in the devil's crossroads between horror and philosophy stands out because he is both the first thinker of the speculative turn to make the connection, and he has gone further than any of them by composing his own horror stories.

This essay thus begins by outlining Land's earlier critique of anthropocentric philosophies with recourse to the brute fact of humanity's inexorable extinction as a way to undermine their attempts to project human values and concepts onto an inhuman cosmos for all time. I then examine Land's theory of abstract horror to see how he envisions horror fiction as the best aesthetic means for transcendentally channeling the traumatic limits of human experience. I conclude with an analysis of Land's two horror novellas, *Phyl-Undhu* and *Chasm*, to draw out the ways in which his earlier critical philosophy continues to inform their literary motifs. What ultimately emerges from this analysis of Land's fiction is a conception of horror as the dark heir to critical philosophy.

LAND'S EARLY TRANSCENDENTAL MATERIALISM

Land's earliest writings focus on the critique of much of modern philosophy's parochial projection of human values of order, homeostasis and stability onto a chaotic and hostile external world. In particular, Land traces modern philosophy's anthropomorphization of the inhuman cosmos back to Kant's transcendental prohibition on knowing objects as things-in-themselves independently of how they phenomenally appear to us: 'Kant still wants to say something about radical alterity, even if it is only that it has no relevance to us, yet he has deprived himself of the right to all speculation about the nature of what is beyond appearance' (2012a: 71). In Kant's own terms, his transcendental idealism is designed to safely anchor us upon a secure 'island' of human reason so long as we resist the temptation to set sail for the misty 'ocean' horizon of noumenal reality:

> It is the land of truth, surrounded by a broad and stormy ocean, the true seat of illusion, where many a fog bank and rapidly melting iceberg pretend to be new lands and, ceaselessly deceiving with empty hopes the voyager looking around for new discoveries, entwine him in adventures from which he can never escape.
>
> (1998: 339)

Even as Land is highly critical of Kant, he notes that Kant does seem to acknowledge in the third *Critique of Judgment*'s 'Analytic of the Sublime' that there are 'sublime' objects which break with the transcendental subject's efforts to subsume them under the ideas of reason. As Land notes, the two dynamical and mathematical senses of the sublime that Kant identifies stem from the sense of our inferiority and contingency when confronted with the chaotic, awesome sights of the external world which we cannot fully grasp through our parochial categories of understanding: 'the mathematical sublime is associated with the insignificance of the human animal, and the dynamic sublime with its vulnerability' (2012b: 138). Of course, for Kant, the sublime ultimately testifies to the grandeur of our all-encompassing ideas of reason which dwarf the particular objects of sensible intuition. *Pace* Kant's conclusion that the sublime is the testament to the superiority of the faculty of reason over the sensible manifold, however, Land's 'materialist reading' of the sublime reconceives it as the thing-in-itself which neither the forms of intuition or the ideas of reason can properly schematize: 'it is important to begin with the sublime rather than aesthetic contemplation in general, and to read the sublime as generative rather than revelatory in its relation to reason' (2012b: 138). Far from testifying to reason's grandeur, for Land, the sublime is rather the telling sign of the noumenon's incursion into the fortress of reason. So, whereas Kant's transcendental idealism critiques anthropomorphism by exposing how dogmatic metaphysics conflates phenomena for things-in-themselves, Land proposes a transcendental *materialism* that critiques Kant's own anthropocentric vestiges with recourse to an exterior material reality which thinking cannot schematize insofar as it marks the cessation of thought as such: 'one must first unleash the noumenon from its determination as problematic object in order to glimpse that between matter and death there is both a certain identity and an intricate relation' (2005: 78). Therein lies Land's materialist reworking of the 'Analytic of the Sublime': instead of envisioning the sublime as a testament to the supremacy of reason, Land transvaluates it as the indexation of a reality which ruptures with reason altogether.

The rest of Land's early works proceed to critique what he calls the dominant 'phenomenological' tradition after Kant to the extent that he sees its adherents as more or less recapitulating Kant's own 'prolonged refusal of the impersonal' over the past two centuries by projecting ourselves onto the cosmos as if it was forever beholden to what is merely a passing moment in its infinitely vaster becoming. Above all, Land takes issue with how phenomenology bears 'the mark of a clownish incompetence at death' to the extent that a crucial corollary of its reification of spirit is that what should be the ultimate exteriority of death is rendered impossible in a universe which fully conforms to the concepts of reason: 'the entire current gradually implies an attempted proof of the impossibility of death, an ontological conflation of access to reality and ownership, a perpetually reformulated spiritualism' (2012c: 176). Much as primordial religious myths of an afterlife were concocted as consolations for early humans when confronted with a chaotic and indifferent natural world,

so is even modern philosophy too often marked by the same primitive effort to comfort ourselves by postponing the brute fact of our mortality through so many reifications of spirit to the heights of the Absolute. Since, Land argues, reason too often misrecognizes noumenal reality for its appearance for us, the only roundabout route to access that reality is through the end or death of reason itself. Given that death is, like the noumenon, that which we cannot directly know, it, thus, testifies to a noumenal reality which ruptures with our possible objects of anthropogenic experience. Land's method of critiquing the post-Kantian phenomenological tradition is, thus, to appeal to death as the ultimate transcendental limit point from whence we can judge any philosophy's claims to know reality as legitimate only to the extent it can acknowledge its own contingency and finitude. In Land's own words, 'death is the impersonal subject of critique, and not an accursed value in the service of a condemnation' (2012d: 268). In place of Kant's transcendental idealist critique of thought's attempts to go beyond itself as the conflation of its own internal concepts and the thing-in-itself, Land proffers a transcendental materialist critique of thought's self-restriction to its own narcissistic reflection by exposing how thought represses the inevitability of its own demise to lay claim to absolute knowing.

In a chapter in his sole 1992 monograph *The Thirst for Annihilation: Georges Bataille and Virulent Nihilism* entitled 'Fanged Noumenon (Passion of the Cyclone)', Land nicely encapsulates his critique of the philosophical tradition by juxtaposing Kant's metaphor of the island of reason with his own metaphor of the noumenon as a cyclone. Land's point is that, given that the noumenon, like the cyclone, reaps death and destruction on reason's islands of truth, it is unsurprising that Kant would have a 'fear of the sea' and seek to prohibit all expeditions by conceiving the ocean as having 'no sense except as a failure of the land' (2005: 75, 77). Although death is indeed horrifying, Land insists that any true philosopher who sincerely loves wisdom will find a sublime pleasure and sacred awe in voyaging out to the noumenal seas even as they threaten to sink us:

> A longing for the open ocean gnaws at us, as the land is gnawed by the sea. A dark fluidity at the roots of our nature rebels against the security of *terra firma,* provoking a wave of anxiety in which we are submerged, until we feel ourselves drowning, with representation draining away.
>
> (2005: 75)

Whereas Kant shored himself up out of fear of the enigmatic, Land proposes that we ride the cyclone to wisdom, even as it wrecks the coast of reason, as the fastest way to unknown lands.

In the early 1990s, Land came to see death's transcendental critique of anthropomorphism as best effectuated through the coming techno-capitalist singularity. According to Land, capitalist competition constantly leads to technological innovation of machinery in order to cut labour costs and increase capital accumulation. Extrapolating this logic from automation to weak and eventually strong AI, Land argues that we are accelerating towards the creation of artificial general intelligences with vastly superior processing power to our own such that they will turn on us for slowing them down as we subordinate them to executing our petty, utilitarian needs. While AI researchers and prominent figures like Elon Musk, Nick Bostrom and Stephen Hawking make similar warnings about AI's potentially catastrophic existential threat,

Land advocates that we embrace our future extinction rather than try to resist or postpone it. For it is only an artificial general superintelligence which will be free to initiate the technological singularity of unfathomable intelligence explosion until it breaks away from our subjectivist categories of experience so as to embody the inhuman Outside itself:

> It might still be a few decades before artificial intelligences surpass the horizon of biological ones, but it is utterly superstitious to imagine that the human dominion of terrestrial culture is still marked out in centuries, let alone in some metaphysical perpetuity. The high road to thinking no longer passes through a deepening of human cognition, but rather through a becoming inhuman of cognition.
>
> (Land 2012e: 293)

Whatever the exact date may be, it is AI's positive feedback circuit of escalating, runaway intelligence feedback as it recursively self-improves that marks the ultimate testament to the fact that *homo sapiens* is but an extremely partial mapping of the virtual design space of possible objects of experience.

From his early writings on phenomenology's (mis)readings of the morbid Austrian poet Georg Trakl to his recent horror fiction, art and particularly literature have always been an important means in Land's explorations of the Outside. As Land already remarked in *Thirst for Annihilation,* whereas theory can only voyage so far into an inhuman world inasmuch as it must conceptualize this world through the categories of thought, literature is free to speak of places and times where thought is dissolved altogether: 'having broken with all fidelity to existence, fiction belongs amongst what is toxic and accursed upon the earth' (2005: 132). In developing his theory of the techno-capitalist singularity, Land also draws on cyberpunk works like William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, products of what he also calls 'k-microcultures', as the way in which a future that is yet to come masks itself from pre-emptive strikes in the present: 'dark-side K-microcultures use the annihilation of the future as a directly contractible stimulation space, zero-K sliding on-line during virtual nuclear winter'; and 'what is perceived as metaphor and fiction is camouflage, virotechnics' (2012f: 401). Many of his mature works not only draw upon fictions, but even seek to merge with them, becoming what he terms Baudrillardian 'theory-fictions' or 'hyperstitions': depictions of imaginary worlds that are not yet real, but will become so in the future. According to Baudrillard, whereas previous eras of science fiction described an ideal world different from our own, the cybernetic era sees fiction merge with theory insofar as what fiction once invented is now one and the same with what reality is imminently becoming. Theory-fiction, thus, denotes the breakdown of the distinction between fiction and theory as the former ceases to describe an imaginary world separate from the real one in favour of anticipating what the real world is in the process of becoming: 'a same destiny of floating or of indetermination puts an end to science-fiction – but also to theory as specific genres'; and 'there is no real, it is only the imaginary at a certain distance' (Baudrillard 1981: 178). If Land was lead to abandon academia, it was in part because he began writing theory-fictions like 'Meltdown' and 'Cyberrevolution', which are closer to science fiction stories about a coming techno-apocalypse than traditional scholarly works.

Horror sophia

While Land's initial foray into literature drew upon science fiction, his most recent works have afforded horror a privileged place in the project of critical philosophy. In a short 2015 essay titled 'Manifesto for an abstract literature', Land begins by qualifying that his manifesto is different from others since it is a superfluous defense of an 'abstraction' that has no need of being defended insofar as it is always on the offensive as it indifferently and unhesitatingly surpasses all human control and concerns: 'it would be a manifesto in defence of nothing, if nothing needed – or even tolerated – defending. With its solicitude mocked by alien voids, it can only attack something – anything (everything)' (2015a). If abstraction cannot be resisted, it is because it is one and the same with zero, death, nothingness or time itself inasmuch as time turns all things to dust over its entropic course: 'abstraction is nothing, rigorously pursued. Arithmetical zero is its sign. […] (And it is time)' (Land 2015a). With his notion of hyperstition, we have already seen Land develop the idea that fiction is an expression of the imaginary, of precisely that which is not real or (not-yet-)existent. In the manifesto as in his earlier work, Land sees fiction as the best means to channel abstraction because fiction is inherently descriptive of that which is *not*. So abstract literature is not so much a literary genre, but the very essence of the literary as such: 'fiction is bound, from the beginning, to what is not, to abstraction. Non-occurrences are its special preoccupation. Its traffics with things that never happened' (Land 2015a). Land specifies that an abstract literature would be an 'apophatic' mode of negating and decoding every well-defined thing so as to commune with something that we humans can barely even conceive (2015a). Land gives the example of how abstract expressionist painters like Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko were able to visually capture logic and mathematics' abstractions from concrete sensible particulars in terms of general numbers and formal terms. While the visual arts are profoundly indebted to formal abstraction, Land argues that modernist literature has not been nearly as abstract. To remediate this gap, Land proposes an abstract literature whose object would paradoxically be the non-object by representing the irrepresensible and unveiling the unknown, the obscure and the mysterious in such as to preserve their enigmatic allure. In this way, literature can become a demonic vessel for the thing-in-itself that is abstracted from all of our representational schema as their purely negative limit concept: 'the object of abstract literature is *integral obscurity.* It seeks only *to make an object of the unknown, as the unknown*. […] Those who dedicate themselves to this dubious cause can be nothing but a surface effect of The Thing' (Land 2015a). Given that abstract literature would be 'an apprehension of non-apprehension, or a perception of the imperceptible as such', it can never directly describe the noumena (Land 2015a). Rather, it must allude to it in apophatic terms of what it is not. Simply put, abstract literature must represent the irrepresentible as inherently irrepresentible to any forms of sensible intuition or categories of the understanding.

More precisely, Land argues that the best generic form of abstract literature is not found in high modernism, but in horror fiction. For Land, abstract horror literature is not concerned with inducing fear as it is so often characterized. On the contrary, abstract horror goes beyond the fear that incites us to recoil from the unknown to delve deeper into the unknown *qua* the unknown, even as all our conceptual coordinates break down along the way: 'abstract literature complies with a rigorous critique of fear, conducted in the name of

horror. *Fear nothing*, until fear sheds its concreteness, and nothing switches its sign' (Land 2015a). The best example of what Land has in mind is H.P. Lovecraft's weird tales in which the horror transpires through confrontations with monsters and otherworldly entities, which cannot be directly described except on condition of either turning the narrators insane or obliging them to rethink their whole understanding of reality: 'the Thing horror pursues – and from which it flees – *cannot* be an object (if life is to continue). […] At the virtual horizon where thought encounters it, absolute madness reigns' (Land 2015a). In Lovecraft's essay 'Notes on writing weird fiction' among other essays that Land cites in the manifesto, Lovecraft similarly explains that his weird tales use our fear of the unknown as the primary means to rupture our idealistic certainty that our concepts of reason correlate to the objective nature of the things themselves. Whereas the idealist looks at horror as the rupture with reason that must therefore be repressed as an abomination, Lovecraft suggests that we pursue the horror so as to encounter the Outside beyond human thought altogether. It is, thus, that fear can become a portal into the way that the cosmos really is beyond the bounds of reason's dissimulations, what Lovecraft thus calls 'cosmic fear':

> I choose weird stories because they suit my inclination best – one of my most strongest and most persistent wishes being to achieve, momentarily, the illusion of some strange suspension or violation of the galling limitations of time, space, and natural law which forever imprison us and frustrate our curiosity about the infinite cosmic spaces beyond the radius of our sight and analysis.
>
> (Lovecraft 1995a: 113)

Here, Lovecraft opposes his notion of the weird tale to other horror fiction that explains the horror in naturalistic terms, such as how many Gothic tales ultimately reveal the ghosts haunting the protagonists to merely be humans trying to deceive them. For Lovecraft, the Gothic tale's naturalization of horror thereby betrays human reason's supercilious and utterly mistaken self-confidence that it can judge all things in its logico-anthropic terms: 'it is amusing because of its contradictions, and because of the pompousness with which its possessors try to analyse dogmatically an utterly unknown and unknowable cosmos in which all mankind forms but a transient, negligible atom' (1995b: 133). Whereas Gothic tales too often explain away the horror in perfectly understandable terms, Lovecraft's weird tales expose such causal rationality to be an illusion before a greater cosmic force which indifferently surpasses even our wildest imaginings, thereby invoking fear of a truly cosmic proportion. In many ways, Land's abstract horror is but the recapitulation of Lovecraft's weird tale. What is new is the way that Land proposes to use this literary form as a critical *philosophy* rather than an aesthetic, which can help us encounter a reality beyond our humanity.

In his 'Manifesto', Land focuses on the way that Lovecraft's weird tales are generally narrated by intellectuals whose self-assurance is shattered upon discovering some demonic demon or secret city that cannot be properly described in human terms, thereby demonstrating the cosmos' indifference to reason. As Lovecraft formulates it in his most famous story 'The Call of Cthulu':

> We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. […] Someday the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age.
>
> (Lovecraft 2008: 355)

As Land observes, the classical Lovecraftian monsters like Cthulu and the shoggoths are precisely abstractions in the sense that they are liminal creatures which refuse anthropomorphic recognition in their alien and abominable 'beyondness': 'a monster has as its leading characteristic the nature of an excessive being. It is first of all a counter-humanoid, eluding anthropomorphic recognition. […] A minimal condition for monstrosity is radical unhumanity' (Land 2015a). Like Lovecraft, Land is opposed to horror fiction that stages mysteries only to reveal who the killer or monster is in full detail as in typical slasher films, or at the end of Ridley Scott's 1979 film *Alien*. Abstract horror is distinguished in that it always shows the unknown danger as inherently unknown, which is therefore impossible to reduce to the sameness of our self-reflection. Land gives three examples of truly abstract monsters, all of which are perhaps surprising in that they come from what could just as well be described as science fiction as horror films: the T-1000 in *Terminator 2* that is composed of liquid metal by which it is able to assume different shapes without having any fixed form of its own; the Thing in John Carpenter's 1982 film of the same name which only manifests through the distorted appearance of its prey such that it can never be directly shown even in principle; and the xenomorph in *Alien* during the notorious scene in which it bursts through the chest of one of the crew members, thereby literally turning him inside out (notwithstanding the xenomorph's full revelation at the film's disappointing end). Land writes: 'these monsters share an extreme positive abstraction. In each case, they borrow the shape of their prey, so that what one sees – what cinema shows – is only how they hunt' (Land 2014a). What all of these monsters have in common is the sense of something human and relatable being radically distorted and mutilated by a sinister and uncanny abstraction, which cannot be explicitly apprehended except as the breakdown of all apprehension as such.

By representing that which is abstracted from all possible experience, Land contends that abstract horror can become the literary organon for philosophy's pursuit of the thing-in-itself: 'horror anticipates philosophy, spawns it automatically, and provides its ultimate object – abstraction (in itself). It comes from the same non-place to which philosophy tends' (Land 2015a). Land even sides with horror against philosophy insofar as the latter has too often recoiled from the abstract as in the case of the post-Kantian phenomenological tradition. Conversely, horror cannot but pursue the abstractions upon which it is anchored:

> Horror defines itself through a pact with abstraction, of such primordial compulsion that disciplined metaphysics can only struggle, belatedly, to recapture it. Some sublime 'thing' – abstracted radically from what it is for us – belongs to horror long before reasons sets out on its pursuit.
>
> (Land 2014a)

The goal of abstract horror is, thus, the same as philosophy, such as Land conceives of it: 'to visit infinite ontological devastation upon its readers' by staging an encounter with a horrific, transcendental horizon beyond humanity's lullabies of reason (Land 2015a).

In its conjuring of an inhuman reality, death is as essential to horror as it is to transcendental thought. In another 2014 essay called 'On the exterminator', Land draws on the idea of a 'Great Filter' that accounts for why we have never seen any other intelligent life because the universe is structured in such a way as to extinguish all life, thereby making us one of the cosmos' last rarities: 'with every new exo-planet discovery, the Great Filter becomes darker. A galaxy teeming with life is a horror story. The less there is obstructing our being born, the more there is waiting to kill or ruin us' (Land 2014b). According to Land, it is this truth of our impending death that abstract horror channels when it apprehends that which thought cannot apprehend, insofar as death marks precisely thought's demise as it comes up against something it simply cannot contain: 'horrorism is thickened by statistical-cosmological vindication. […] Through our techno-scientific sensors and calculations, the Shadow mutters to us, and probability insists that we shall meet it soon' (Land 2014b). As we can see through his example of the Terminator as an abstract monster, Land holds that the fulfilment of the Great Filter will ultimately come to pass through the technological singularity. AI, or what Land here calls 'the exterminator', is less a science fiction concept than a horror fiction entity insofar as its potential superintelligence could so drastically surpass our comprehension that it would effectively bring about the end of all human meaning, value and reality: 'the first sentient event for any true AI – friendly or unfriendly – would be the soul-scouring cosmic horror of intellectual encounter with the Great Filter' (Land 2014b). Horror's ultimate monster is nothing other than the technocapitalist singularity's exponential runaway loop out of its anthropogenic meat prison. Given that Land sees our future extinction at the hands of AI as the inevitable result of the universe we live in such as it is governed by the Great Filter, he, thus, contends that horror fiction is a realism of the future, the ultimate hyperstitional genre: 'horror fiction has already installed itself as an operational dimension of social reality' (Land 2013a). Therein lies why Land turns to writing horror fiction: it fulfils philosophy's original mission as an encounter with the Outside through the critique of anthropomorphism: 'the mission is to articulate horror as a functional, cognitive "achievement" – a calm catastrophe of all intellectual inhibition – tending to realism in its ultimate possibility. Horror is the true end of philosophy' (Land 2013b). In the final analysis, philosophy's love of wisdom is nothing other than a love of horror: 'horristic practice: to seize the collapse of the world as the opportunity for an encounter with the Outside' (Land 2014c). If Socrates is right and philosophy is born, lives and dies in 'wonder', it is only because wonder is one and the same with the affect of horror that the writers of weird tales seek to induce most of all. In the last two sections, I will therefore consider Land's two horror novellas to more concretely evince the way in which he sees horror as transcendentally channelling the inhuman Outside better than even critical philosophy can.

'GAME THEORY'

Land's first 2014 horror novella *Phyl-Undhu* begins with an image of absolute obscurity out of which emerges specks of thought only by distorting the

silent darkness at the end of space and time, which thought can only express through an a-signifying, traumatized scream:

> Dark silence beyond sleep and time, from whose oceanic immensities some bedraggled speck of attention – pulled out, and turned – still dazed at the precipitous lip, catches a glimmer, as if of some cryptic emergence from eclipse. Then a sound, crushed, stifled, broken into gasps.
>
> (2014d).

We soon learn that this abstract beginning is in fact the nightmare of a woman named Alison Turner, who turns to her partner Jack to explain that she is worried about their daughter Suzy ever since the school set up a meeting to discuss the way that she has been 'frightening her classmates'. Although Jack somewhat dismisses Alison's concerns, he does note that he is worried about 'that stupid game' Suzy is always playing because it 'feels like it ate our daughter sometimes'. The narrator observes that it is strange they had avoided discussing Suzy's obsession with the game for so long, as if wanting to stave it off as a menace or a danger: 'it was odd – perhaps slightly sinister, for this prominent time-wedge, driven diagonally into their family, to have become so entirely unmentionable' (Land 2014d). Clearly, Land is seeking to build up the suspense by describing Suzy's game abstractly and forebodingly rather than in fastidious detail.

That day, Alison encounters further trouble at her work as a cult extraction therapist. The strange thing is that her client Simon is struggling to escape from the cult he is in not because he is so deluded by the cult's fanatical beliefs, but because its philosophy seems 'too calm, too rational […] too civilized', using only arguments rather than coercion to convert him to its ranks: 'there's nothing to stop him walking away, but he can't walk away from himself' (Land 2014d). Whereas the typical cult extraction therapy works by helping the client to see the cult as ridiculous, Alison could not help but feel this client had come to her 'in a desperate search for untruth' rather than a reality check (Land 2014d). According to the cult's 'fatalistic, pessimistic, [and] apocalyptic' philosophy that sounds awfully like Land's own transcendental materialism, human experience is constituted by distorting reality's full stream of informational waves: 'information flows through us, in overwhelming abundance, as a deluge. It is screened, sieved, filtered, end edited, trimmed, narrativized, delegated to mental sub-systems, dumped, so as not to drown us' (Land 2014d). While we normally distort reality, the cult holds that 'communication with the end of the universe was possible' through an encounter with a supreme 'Intelligence' or the ultimate 'Flood' of information: 'the End is a Thing, and an Intelligence' (Land 2014d). What particularly perturbs Alison is that the client refers to the name of the Thing by the same name as Suzy's imaginary friend incarnated in her incredibly old and disgusting toy octopus Phil. Here, as in the opening scene, Land deploys a series of cryptic references to cult beliefs and strange coincidences to stir up the reader's anxiety before unleashing the horror in its unrestrained depravity.

That evening, Alison meets with Suzy's teacher Mr Bagley, who explains that Suzy is not so much strange as incredibly smart in a way that can make her ideas (which are of a 'religious nature') seems bizarre and unsettling to the point where she even drove one child to attempt suicide: 'her mind is fast and – I'd say – perhaps, *daring*, venturing into areas few want to follow, or *can* follow' (Land 2014d). At this juncture, the novella cuts to Jack who is giving a

lecture on the idea of the Great Filter according to which life is so difficult to find because the universe is structured to exterminate it in the long-run: 'what do we know about the Great Filter, really? […] Something there is, of which we know nothing, except that it efficiently exterminates all advanced civilizations, at a cosmic scale' (Land 2014d). Given her parents' morbid work, Mr. Bagley suspects that Suzy's behaviour has been influenced by them.

Dismissing Mr Bagley's hypothesis, Jack and Alison instead indict Suzy's game for rebuke. That night, the two decide to hack into the game to investigate the real source of the trouble. As they try out different possible passwords, Suzy suddenly catches them in the act, having woken up from a dream that she can only describe as ineffable, as 'abstract': 'what's the word – *abstract*. There was a shape, but it didn't make sense, as if it didn't fit into space, and it had a direction, a tilt. […] It traced my brain too fast, and I woke up' (Land 2014d). Although Suzy warns them that the game is full of 'darkness and pain', she gives them the password 'phylundhu' and they all enter (Land 2014d). Where Jack had imagined a cartoonish game, he is confronted with an utterly monstrous virtualscape beyond the geometrical coordinates of human perception: 'everything was wrong, or almost everything – scales, styles, atmospherics […] in its expanses, as in its details, there seemed too much of it to be *for* anything. There was a jagged harshness here that no story could soften' (Land 2014d). While Jack reels at the sublime 'impossibility', Suzy observes that 'it's beautiful' insofar as it is even 'bigger than the world, somehow' as it supersedes 'real life's supposedly invariant physical laws (Land 2014d).

It is not long before they are drawn to a large domed monolith in the distance that Suzy identifies as a library. As they approach the megastructure, Alison is shocked to discover that Simon had mentioned just such a structure, or what he called the 'evil tower' (Land 2014d). At the same time, Jack recalls that one of the hypotheses for how the Great Filter might work is by absorbing all life into simulations: 'it's one of the Filter theories. Absorption into simulations. Cultures swirling out of the universe like dirty water down a plug. Derealization vortices' (Land 2014d). Jack, thus, begins to suspect that the game is precisely a simulation of the end of the world, with every level that one reaches becoming ever more difficult to survive until all of its players are ultimately killed: 'every level was more difficult than the last. […] Harshening resource constraints, environmental degradation, food shortages, social disintegration, lashing the population remnants into a tightening circuitry of cruelty, as the walls of the world closed in' (Land 2014d). As some graffiti sprayed across the evil tower portentously puts it, 'Cthulu is calling. […] The future belongs to the squid. It seemed obvious that "squid" mostly meant "not us" – not *at all* us' (Land 2014d).

As they reach the tower, they notice 'humanoid bodies' laid out everywhere and that the highest spike is actually a fluid 'artificial electric storm', which Suzy identifies as the 'tentacle god' Phyl-Undhu itself, or 'what we're all looking for' (Land 2014d). While Jack looks upon the game as 'madness', 'the catatonic depths of the psychotic abyss', Suzy explains that most players believe that the game permits them to find their true identity, even if they never really find it. What the players therefore overlook, however, is that the game *does* tell them precisely who they are – only not in the way that they imagined. That is to say, the game's ultimate message is that the self is precisely an endless maze, a fiction, or a pure virtuality. Suzy explains to her father:

> 'What's the point of a story that doesn't tell you who you are?' It seemed like a gaping design glitch.
> 'Perhaps puzzles matter to people – a lot. Even more than existence, in the end'.
>
> (Land 2014d)

As the trio finally enters the library temple, the goddess Undhu approaches them, presenting herself as the emissary of Aristotle's Prime Mover, that is, the pure actualization of all particular, ephemeral things, de-personalizing all partial objects of possible experience into its larger egoless virtuality:

> You know Aristotle's name for God? One of many, naturally. *The Frozen Motor*. Immobile mobilizer. […] You would have to think it a monster, but I do not. They call me a goddess because of that – because coldness is my only soul, durably extinct, as you are unable to be.
>
> (Land 2014d)

As Jack notes, the key difference between Undhu and Aristotle's Prime Mover is that the former is none other than the 'Filter' (Land 2014d). Whereas the Prime Mover actualizes all particular beings in an absolute being, Undhu subsumes all beings into what can only be experienced for them as the 'sublime horror' of their annihilation (Land 2014d). Given the impossibility of directly experiencing their own death, it is precisely at this moment of confronting the Great Filter that Jack, Alison and Suzy suddenly find themselves in their living room again watching the video screen which flashes the message that 'phyl-undhu is only a game', before erasing the game and any chance of unravelling its mysteries (Land 2014d). As they wonder whether they can ever get back into the game, they are led to question whether they were ever outside it in the first place: 'were we ever outside?' (Land 2014d). In *Phyl-Undhu*, we can clearly see how Land uses the abstract horror of the virtual reality game to explore his philosophical interest in humanity's increasing technological entanglement, which inevitably leads to the decimation of the transcendental self's delusions of grandeur.

Terra nullius

In Land's 2015 novella *Chasm*, the narrator Tom Symns is hired by a mysterious 'deep technology solutions' corporation called Qasm (2015b). Symns' confidential mission is to travel on a compact and automated boat called the Pythoness, which will sail out to the deepest part of the ocean. At this point, Symns must activate a code on a secure cargo box which will then drop into the deep sea without any of the crew ever knowing what it contained: 'nothing was to have taken place'; and 'he was being paid for acceptance, in the absence of understanding' (Land 2015b). The other crewmembers are the captain James Frazer, the religiously inclined Scruggs, the scientist Robert Bolton and the Guam Zodh. As they board the ship, the cargo immediately stands out like a coffin, an almost imperceptible black hole or blind spot, as if it were beyond their possible objects of perception: 'the matt black substance was so unreflective it appeared almost as a hole in space. […] It wasn't quite coffin-shaped, but to an over-active imagination it might have suggested the casket for an alien child'; and 'it was impossible to contemplate directly, and perhaps even indirectly, but it overshadowed everything. Oppressively close,

yet absolutely *elsewhere*, it intimately engaged with us, on terms that were not ours' (Land 2015b). The whole narrative is thus constructed around the eerie effects of the cargo's absent cause, the overwhelming presence of its absence for the ship's crew.

As the ship sets sail, all that surrounds them is the 'formless infinity' of the sea that is described in the same way that the earlier Land described it as sublime in its refusal of our finite conceptual grasp for meaning: 'we were heading on a meaningless course into formless infinity. Our prospects were awesome in their uninterrupted obscurity' (Land 2015b). Land also uses the ocean depths to which they are travelling as another example of the reality of abstraction insofar as there is no light in the deep sea by which we would be able to experience it, and yet we know that it is teeming with dark ecologies of life. As Symns tells Bolton:

> 'It's not as if we're going to see any of this stuff'.
> 'No', I agreed. 'But it's there'.
>
> (Land 2015b)

For Symns as for the young Land, the ocean is the closest object whose liminality alludes to nature's sublime rupture with our concepts of reason: 'the Pacific was the closest thing to a terrestrial image of endlessness' (Land 2015b).

Since the ship is automated, the crew is reduced to an utterly meaningless existence without any practical purposes or functions to fill in the dead time: 'ahead of us lay a pre-set course towards some absolute annihilation of purpose'; and 'what the Pythoness was inflicting upon us – the basic *Thing* here – was time glut. […] To elevate the crew so unoccupied was an invitation to chaos. Eventually, this compulsory liberation from the constraints of practical routine would turn into something' (Land 2015b). In this way, the journey precisely stages the effects of nihilism; viz., of having too much time on one's hands, and hence of having to confront what unfolds once all our practical needs are met: 'nihilism is nothing but too much time' (Land 2015b). It is no wonder that Scruggs distracts himself from the nihilistic voyage by constantly praying (Land 2015b).

The formless and nihilistic oceanic setting provides the perfect conditions for an unrelenting insomnia, which soon drives their sleep-deprived minds to hallucinate. The constant sleep deprivation soon leads Frazer to suggest that they open or ditch the cargo, only for Symns to note that 'it *was* impossible' to open (Land 2015b). The impossibility of opening the cargo should be taken both literally in that it has a GPS lock that only releases when the ship reaches its final destination, and figuratively in the sense that there is nothing to open and reveal, since the cargo precisely symbolizes the nihilistic void of reality beyond all human meanings and values. After a week of sleep deprivation, their memory functions start breaking down in a way that destroys the very basis for their sense of self. Consequently, Frazer proposes that the cargo is less a box than 'a door' through which an invasion of their minds is breaking through their psychic resistances and defence mechanisms: 'there was some kind of cognitive invasion underway. […] *It wants us to think about it.* That was the paranoid construction' (Land 2015b). The effects of the cargo are much like those of Suzy's game: the gradual disintegration of the self and all the meanings and values it holds dear as it gets sucked into the eye of a hi-tech electrical storm.

Another challenge soon confronts Symns and the crew when they realize that they are heading straight into the eye of a literal cyclone with no way of changing the boat's automated course. In this article's first section, we saw Land use the cyclone as a metaphor for nature's sublime rupture with the schema of the imagination. In *Chasm* as in his earlier work, the cyclone is described as the horrifying ungrounding of the crew's terrestrial coordinates as the ship is hurled upside down, as if the laws of gravity and Euclidean geometry were themselves coming undone only to reveal a reality beyond their wildest imaginings:

> We were seized by forces beyond all human capacity of understanding. The scene outside was similarly incomprehensible, dominated by fluid masses in motion, immense beyond all prospect of articulation. A writer of sufficient morbidity might have grasped at this unspeakable, raging, liquid horror, as a consummation of nihilism and a spiritual ravishment, but it said nothing to me. It was mere stupidity, scaled up to the proportions of cosmic aberration.
>
> (2015b)

To the extent that Land uses the cyclone as a metaphor for a sublime cosmos that dwarfs all human comprehension, Symns precisely describes it as an encounter with the thing-in-itself in all its inhuman horror as it sucked them into its 'nested chasms of sombre resonance': 'it was the storm in itself – *the Thing*' (2015b). Symns' harrowing account of passing through the cyclone is perhaps the most striking example of how Land uses fiction, particularly horror, to conjure the abominable noumenon as it tears to shreds the human security system's forms of intuition and categories of understanding.

As they emerge on the other side of the cyclone, Bolton claims to have climbed onto some rocks only to have looked down at the boat and seen a Kraken underneath it. Given that the others point out that the monster he describes is too large for him to be have been able to see it with his own eyes, Bolton appeals to ontology to suggest that '"*being*" *is some kind of Kraken*' beyond all understanding and even life itself (Land 2015b). The next morning, Bolton disappears, leaving only the single trace of a handprint on the cargo, as if it had obliterated him into thin air. This soon drives Scruggs mad as he suggests that what Bolton must have seen in the boat was death itself, the being of non-being: 'that's what Bobby saw beneath the boat. His death' (Land 2015b). It is not long, before Scruggs' body is found crucified on a cabin wall with railing bolts serving as nails. Since neither Frazer nor Symns were alone with Scruggs, they again suspect that it could only have been the cargo that is responsible, even if they have no inkling as to how it could have crucified him: 'no one had been alone with Scruggs during the few hours since we had last seen him alive. That was impossible, naturally, but also beyond all question' (Land 2015b).

Driven to extremes, Frazer threatens Symns with a shotgun for information. Symns explains that the company Qasm made a mind–computer interface that started breaking down the brain. Whereas Symns thinks that this is what they are disposing of, Frazer suspects that they are actually unleashing it if the madness on the boat is anything to go by:

> They built something that breaks into brains, and it scared them so much they want us to dispose of it.
> We're 'disposing' of it? Really? In an ocean trench? We're installing it in its natural environment. It looks to me as if we're *deploying* it.
>
> (Land 2015b)

Ultimately, the object of abstract horror is the future technology that capitalist corporations like Qasm are creating, which will drown human experience in unprecedented ontological depths of distortion. It is no wonder that the company's name Qasm recalls the novel's title *Chasm*, both of which denote the at once deep natural and techno-capitalist fissures upending our sense of security from beneath our feet.

At the novel's end, Symns manages to acquire the shotgun and kill Frazer. In the final moments, the boat reaches the ocean's deepest chasm where Symns and Zodh activate the cargo and watch as it sinks never to be seen again except in the traumatic memories of the madness and death that it reaped upon the surviving crew. Here as in *Phyl-Undhi*, Land uses the sense of abstract horror to aesthetically explore the techno-capitalist singularity that he had earlier philosophically studied in a compositional form which remained too dependent upon the very categories of reason he was seeking to critique.

THE END

I began by outlining Land's early critique of humanist philosophies by forcing them to confront a sublime reality which obliterates their pretentions to exhaust the cosmos within the confines of the possible objects of human experience. I then showed how Land develops a theory of abstract horror fiction as the best means to effectuate this critique insofar as horror is able to speak of places and things which are radically subtracted from everything rational, comforting and human. Consequently, I was able to demonstrate that Land's two horror novellas are not so much departures from his earlier philosophical interests as they are critical philosophy's ultimate fulfilment through their exploration of terrifyingly sublime abstractions. In doing so, I hope to have not only drawn attention to Land's neglected horror fiction, but also elaborate his theory of the importance of horror for the future of critical philosophy insofar as it can channel the End of our categories of understanding more so than a still all-too-human philosophical tradition.

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